Spotlighting
What Works

"Live" Proof That IDIS Works Locally

Rochester, NY, shows communities how automated reporting system improves management

Spotlighting What Works shares information about the exemplary professional practices of community development practitioners across the country. Each bulletin highlights the best practices of many of the 1997 John JGunther Award recipients, as well as issues dealing with HUD's Grants Management System, and other issues facing community practitioners. This issue looks at how the Rochester, New York community, a best practice in peer-to-pear assistance in IDIS, used IDIS and trained others on it.. In sharing with you such example of innovation and creativity we hope to raise the standard of community development by learning from and building upon the successes of others.

Another report to do? Another grant to document? What accomplishments or progress can be demonstrated? Little time to meet the reporting deadline? Feeling overwhelmed? Need a vehicle to stop the madness? IDIS may be the answer.

Users of government and private funding have a responsibility and obligation to those grant issuing entities and to the taxpayers, board members, shareholders, and management to account for those funds and show progress or quality investment. There

should be no debate there, but how do communities reduce the burden of reporting, documenting, and record keeping and still have time to run their programs? The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has developed a system that seems to work well in providing a user-friendly format to ensure that there is the necessary accountability and that the public is made readily aware of the progress of HUD awarded grants.

Automated systems are the wave of the future and HUD has set out to capture the future now. One way HUD is forging into the 21st century is through its automated system for keeping track of money for formula programs run out of the Office of Community Planning and Development (CPD) called the **Integrated Disbursement Information System (IDIS).**

Rochester, New York has demonstrated some success with this system.

Using the two-year-old system has become second nature to some cities, including the City of Rochester. Practitioners there have capitalized on IDIS as a tool to improve management.

This mid-sized city quickly learned, mastered, and began to share tips and techniques so well that it has been cited as a John J. Gunther in Blue Ribbon in Community Development Award, and they are touting its benefits to others.

Having first made the system work well for themselves and after achieving some managerial success with IDIS, Rochester has embarked upon an insightful effort to demonstrate the system to other communities.

Rochester's Implementation Plan
Before sharing their insights with the rest of the state and other communities, and even before they started really using the system for work and not just practice (users call it "going live"), Rochester put together an implementation plan, which contained four broad elements including awareness, training, processing procedures and protocols, and provision of timely information to program managers. Their goal was to implement the system with no significant delays in processing program documents or disbursement of funds.

Joe Mustico, Associate Administrative Analyst, and Wilma Wheten, Head Account Clerk for Rochester's Department of Community Development and the IDIS coordinators for the City said than an implementaion plan is a must before getting started.

Collecting the Right Data
Mustico says it is important to develop a **data collection system** that ensures all data is entered efficiently and effectively. He adds that it is important to set up activities in such a way that provides for improved tracking and record keeping.

Here's how Rochester improved their recordkeeping: When the City incurs a financial obligation, an activity is set up on IDIS. For example, each housing assistance agreement generates an activity set up by address under the Consolidated Planning System Housing Rehabilitation Project. As a result, IDIS is a growing computer data base containing management information for *each* property assisted, not just whole projects or activities. The City followed this methodology for not only housing, but economic development and public services projects as well.

Rochester uses the local control number assigned to the agreement as the IDIS grantee activity number, which permits easy retrieval of information. By following this approach, record keeping has been greatly improved. More significantly, the City can easily match an expenditure with a specific accomplishment, thus creating a new level of accountability.

Margie Dziwulski and Peggy Meinl, IDIS coordinators for the Buffalo HUD field office, say that Mustico and Wilma Wheten deserve high praise for the effective use of IDIS. Rochester quickly recognized the potential benefits of the system and crafted a way to get the best use out of it by utilizing exisiting processes and procedures. Dziwulski and Meinl say it was definitely the implementation plan that made Rochester so successful with IDIS.

They also needed to get the program managers and department heads on board because not everyone was familiar with the system.

Monroe County went first and then Rochester on December 7, 1996. As Mustico explains, he was curious about how IDIS worked and how well they

could implement it. Rochester decided to go live as soon as possible to see how it works. They didn't necessarily see any advantage in forging ahead early, but their curiosity and interest got the best of them and they decided to take a chance on the system at their earliest opportunity. No, they weren't masochists. They really wanted to find a better, more efficient, easier way to track and report performance and productivity.

Dziwulski and Meinl provided the initial training on IDIS for Rochester. They were able to successfully train Rochester on the system because of the extensive training they had already received from training sessions in Washington, D.C. and locally. With an implementation plan in tact it was easier for Rochester than for other communities to advance quickly. They thought out the system before they got started. Some grantees did not begin to think out the process until after they had gone live on IDIS. Rochester had planned their record keeping transformation to the IDIS so well and had become experts on the system, that now Dziwulski and Meinl sometimes call Mustico and Wheten as a resource, just to double check some of the things on which they are working.

Incentives to Go Live
While HUD has issued a mandate that all grantees use IDIS, other factors were operating in Rochester with their desire to rush to get on the system. They could have waited and witnessed the trials and tribulations of other communities before plotting their course. But, they had other ambitions and motivating factors.

Besides just wanting to be first, improved record-keeping and report preparation clearly were motivating

factors in deciding to go live early. In Rochester's highly decentralized structure with an $18.1 million annual budget and 68 housing projects and economic development and public service projects, record-keeping tends to be difficult.

Before IDIS, staff members were going to different file cabinets and other locations to gather and process information. It would take about six to seven weeks to prepare the Grantee Performance Reports (GPR), which is required yearly by every entitlement community. But IDIS has sped up the process. With the extra time saved from collecting information for reports, they have been able to focus on other efforts.

Seeing is Believing
The City of Buffalo wanted to see what IDIS was about, so the field office put them in touch with Rochester. Rochester had been an early advocate for IDIS and they were delighted to be asked to show another grantee how the system worked. Buffalo wanted to see how the funds are drawn down, but it was difficult to understand or visualize without seeing it first hand.

So they ventured to Rochester for a demonstration.

Showing IDIS Up Close
At the request of the field office, Rochester invited Buffalo to see a demonstration of IDIS in use. Rochester reserved their conference room for a day and held a session to show the city of Buffalo the merits of

using IDIS. They divided the day-long conference into two sessions.

The morning session allowed for individuals to ask questions about IDIS. Issues of concern included how to set up housing rehabilitation and floating loans. Participants were also concerned about using the system to track economic development projects.

Teaching others what they had learned on their own, Rochester staff included in the morning session information on how a grantee should set up its system and how to develop an implementation plan.

In the afternoon, the demonstration was held. Staff demonstrated how to make the "draws". (The term has become the common jargon for the drawing down of funds.) They saved the draw request from the prior day and used it in the actual demonstration. The live demonstration enhanced their understanding of IDIS and its benefits.

Mustico believes that grantees can learn a lot from each other. He says he feels that it is good to talk to someone with experience. Not only does he endorse the idea of all-day conferences to teach others, but he is also a big fan of the IDIS user group meetings, which HUD set up last year to provide a forum for IDIS users to meet and share concerns, tips, and information. He says he feels that with this group, grantees can learn how others are doing with their Consolidated Plans and other issues. Mustico says he likes to make presentations and interact with his colleagues because it makes the job more interesting. It's a lot of work, but somebody has to do it and Mustico says he enjoys the challenge.

Benefits of IDIS

Dziwulski and Meinl said Rochester took a complex system and made it a management tool that works for them. With a new system that involved both changes in physical hardware and in the way communities think about tracking funds, it was natural that many communities struggled with technical aspects of the system. Rochester staff managed to get past the complexities and see the management benefits. Then they showed others how to make it work. Staff says IDIS can ensure that there is no repetition of work. Since Mustico and Wheten have been involved with the system, HUD has been able to get information much quicker.

Mustico's reward beyond the satisfaction of good management: He gets to serve on the IDIS Advisory Group. Lincoln Burrus, an IDIS trainer at HUD headquarters, has found Mustico to be a hard worker dedicated to seeing that IDIS work. On the advisory committee, he gets a first look at where IDIS is going in the future. He also gets the opportunity to suggest enhancements that will help all grantees across the country.

Others Share the Wealth, Too
Rochester is not alone in sharing best practices in IDIS. Westchester County, New York worked also with the Yonkers staff to the County offices. They invited Yonkers, one of the last grantees to go live on IDIS, to a session for peer-to-peer assistance.

Second in the country to go live on IDIS was Jefferson County, KY. The County staff has responded to 85

requests for assistance from grantees around the United States. Six grantees visited with the staff in their Louisville offices to review their efforts with IDIS.

Living With IDIS
By the early part of 1998, all entitlement communities should have gone live on IDIS. How can the system be improved to make it even more beneficial to grantees? Grantees may need to learn how to best utilize IDIS to improve their management.

IDIS has been quite a success for HUD and its grantees, barring the initial inconvenience of learning the system and transferring record keeping to a new system. It is quite clear that automated systems will improve productivity, accountability, and efficiency. However, it will take peers teaching peers to make the learning process most effective. It is

> ### *Worth Noting…*
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> - Of 963 entitlement grantees, 958 are currently using the system. Getting that many grantees to use a brand new system was no small feat!
> - Delaware was the first State to "go live" on IDIS.

essential that housing and community development practitioners begin to share the knowledge gleaned from best practices and utilize the management tools and techniques they illustrate.

Once grantees go live on IDIS, they are not left to their own devices to fully appreciate and navigate the system. There are a range of activities provided that help simplify the system, keep them abreast of updates, and provide support to users.

Just a few key strokes on the computer keyboard will land them on the Internet where **HUD's Home Page** is

found. Simply point your web browser to http://www.hud.gov/cpd/idisweb.html and find plenty of information on IDIS.

In addition, the **IDIS User Group** meets regularly and serves as "an aggressive servicing program to ease the comfort level of IDIS users by anticipating and counteracting major problems in utilizing the system as intended. It is a formal network of information-sharing among users designed to foster an open dialogue, and help each user to learn from the experiences of others. All grantees that are live are invited to participate.

The monthly newsletter *IDIS Live* communicates news, technical information, and upcoming events pertaining to IDIS.

The Advisory Group gathers to discuss possible improvements in the system. There is also IDIS training. There is plenty of assistance for those who want it.ð

Other Resources
The *IDIS Live* newsletter is available on HUD's home page or by calling the IDIS hotline at (800) 273-2573.

> ### *For Further Information…*
> - For more information about Rochester's award-winning IDIS strategy, contact Joe Mustico at 716-428-6552.
> - *Spotlighting What Works* is published by HUD's Office of Community Planning and Development, Office of Executive Services. This issue was written by **Kathryn Pearson-West**. For more information about Best Practices, contact Letha E. Strothers, by e-mail at letha_e._strothers@hud.gov or by calling her directly at 202-708-1283. Visit our website at